

THE DECLINING BIRTH-RATE: ITS CAUSES AND EFFECTS.

By A. K. CHALMERS,

Medical Officer of Health, Glasgow.

It need scarcely be explained that the volume which bears this title contains the Report of the National Birth-Rate Commission, and the chief evidence taken by it over a period of fully two years, throughout which its sittings extended.

The Commission was appointed and had begun its work before war was declared or even generally anticipated in this country, but the war has added an importance to the work which cannot readily be over-estimated. The object of the inquiry cannot better be indicated than by abbreviating the Commissioners' description of it. It was to inquire into the extent and character of the decline in the birth-rate; its relation to infant mortality; its distribution, topographically and according to income, occupation, and religious profession of the parents; the relation of sterile to fruitful marriages; the alleged causes of the decline, whether physiological (age at marriage, effect of town life, etc.), or prudential; the effect of the decline on the children, on their parents, and on home life; and its economic and national aspects.

Broadly speaking the main question before the Commission was not whether the birth-rate is falling, but why? The gossip of the market-place had for long had his answer ready, but there was the usual doubt as to whether it contained the whole truth. According to him the explanation lay wholly in a volitional and deliberative act, excusable—if it were to be excused—under the guise of prudential motives. And when the motives came to be reckoned with, two principal groups were readily distinguishable, both operative in the same direction. In one case it was assumed that the few children would be more vigorous than the many; that they would be more amply equipped for the struggle by a more prolonged period of education, while the parents would have more freedom, more “enjoyment of life.”

On the other hand it was feared that over-population would result in over-competition for a limited amount of subsistence, and reduce the individual chance of earning a living. Clearly, in the first case, the motive had much to be said for it. The conception of home and family life places obvious restrictions on reproduction as a purely physiological process. But the theory in question was based on an assumption which has never been demonstrated, and is not, we believe, in the main true, that a reduction in quantity necessarily implies an improvement in quality; while the dread of over-population has been mainly the economist's method of explaining the fall in the artisan rate. Once started in a vicious circle of reasoning fallacies grow like nettles, and the Commissioners, we think, have done a valuable public service in bringing the question back to a discussion on the merits. With much urgency the effect of a selective birth-rate has been pleaded of late years, and with much misgiving as to the answer the question has been asked, "Who will form the next generation of Englishmen?" Were we to accept the teaching that the economically unsuccessful in life are always and only reckless people, so reckless in fact that they had proposed, and were proceeding to supply 50 per cent. of the next generation, then the resulting moral degeneration added to physical unfitness would complete the ruin of the race. On the surface, perhaps, the conclusions seemed logical, but we have been brought back to revalue the data with the suddenness of a cataclysm. In grim earnestness the answer has come from the trenches that we are neither morally degenerate nor physically unfit. On the contrary, the lesson is being taught with all the ruthlessness of a race struggle, that if the soldier when he returns to civil life is given an equal opportunity to display his manhood, then from the depths of the present trial we may find a stimulus to recreate a social England which may well remain the pattern of civilisation for many centuries.

An additional report follows the principal one, and we could well have wished that it had been given a more prominent place in the volume, for although the report itself deals at some length with the evidence submitted, the additional report makes what we think is a fairly successful effort to present a

reasoned consideration of the probable effect of a permanently low birth-rate on the future of the race, and contains some pertinent and withal practical suggestions regarding the incidence of taxation, and other methods of alleviating the burden of parenthood, which are presented, without any trace of dogmatism. Nor do we remember to have seen elsewhere so dispassionate a statement of the problem of adjusting the balance between East and West as is here given in a few sentences. Although couched in language the significance of which may easily be missed, it serves to suggest a racial struggle still in the womb of history, which for magnitude may well overshadow the present Armageddon of western nations.

But the decline in the home birth-rate does not stand alone. A similar movement is in progress throughout the peoples inhabiting western and north-western Europe, and from a consideration of declining birth-rates the problem passes to a more complex form in the question "Is there also a decline in the fertility of western civilised nations?" Are we the unconscious witnesses of the slowly gathering twilight of European civilisation? And if it be said that the Commissioners have not categorically answered this question it must also be admitted that they have brought within handy limits, and to some extent crystallised, evidence which hitherto, and for the most part, has been scattered widely throughout the transactions of societies, and in official reports. But the excellence of the volume does not lie here, it lies rather in the demonstration that a subject of great national importance, bristling throughout with difficulties, both of thought and expression, can be presented to the general reader without offence, and with a sense of the gravity of the issues which lifts it out of the atmosphere of sensationalism.

The results of the inquiry are gathered into five chapters, dealing in succession with the statistical evidence; the economical and social aspects; the housing question (all social inquiries lead thitherward); the medical aspects; and the moral and religious aspects of the question.

The intricacies of the problem are obvious from the outset. Broadly speaking the birth-rate of England and Wales has fallen by about one-third within 40 years. Its maximum since

registration began was in 1876, when the crude rate was 36.3 per 1,000; in 1912 it was 23.8. Incidental to this part of the inquiry the Commissioners pay a well-merited tribute to Miss E. M. Elderton's Report on the English Birth-rate, and quote her conclusion that the decline north of the Humber has been generally more marked in those districts in which a higher standard of living has been found. Hampstead and Shoreditch are cited in opposition as local illustrations of the same discrepancy. But a corrective comes from Norfolk, where, in the "mainly rural part of the county," the decline has been slightly greater than in the city of Norwich, and the final conclusion is the uniformity of the decline in town and country.

The inquiry is then carried to a consideration of the fertility of social grades, and a grouping of the married male population under 55 years into five classes is given to show that in 1911 the birth-rate of the upper and middle classes was 119 per 1,000, against 213 for unskilled workmen, while that of skilled workmen occupied an intermediate place with a rate of 153. The absence of the age of the wives of these groups, however, leaves one unconvinced that the figures represent their true fertility, and this view is strengthened by a subsequent statement in the report, based on information supplied by Dr. Stevenson, and supported by the Scottish Census Report, that the fertility for any given age of husband decreased steadily with the age of wife, and that the fertility for any given age of wife was little affected by age of husband, although somewhat greater for young husbands.

For long it has been recognised that death-rates decrease as the size of house increases, and it would appear that fertility also is similarly related to the economic standard which the house represents. "The more prosperous the social class the lower is the fertility," and although there is a higher death-rate among children born in the smaller houses their effective births, *i.e.*, the number surviving through the first year of life, remain higher than among their more favoured brethren—a conclusion by no means new, and one which opposing schools of sociologists will apply in contrary directions.

The influence of religious profession is marked by a query as the available evidence is obscured by racial and social differences. Among Jews in the East End of London it rose in 1886-90, when the birth-rate fell for London as a whole. But the Jewish birth-rate varies in different countries. In Bulgaria, Galicia, and Russia it exceeds Whitechapel. Elsewhere it is lower than the French birth-rate; in Bavaria in 1913 it was 16; in Breslau in 1906 it was only 15.

Within the United Kingdom, and apart from Jews, the fertility in Connaught "has been rising in the last few years with even greater rapidity than it has been declining in this country." It might appear that the prevailing dogma which ascribes reduced fertility to material prosperity is in some danger here, but the Commissioners escape the dilemma by adopting a suggestion which would explain the rise in Connaught, despite its increased prosperity, to the efficiency of a "religious bar" against artificial restriction of fertility. We wonder, indeed, we doubt, whether the explanation is so simple, and are more in sympathy with a subsequent statement that the Commissioners do not feel justified in drawing any very definite conclusion as to the effect of religious profession.

In considering the effect of education apart from social position, the report deals with Mrs. Henry Sidgwick's inquiry into the "Health Statistics of Women Students of Cambridge and Oxford, and of their Sisters" (1890), and with the results of a new investigation conducted for the Commission by Miss Agnes Savil and Dr. Major Greenwood, Jun.

The conclusion in both is the same. "The fertility of the non-college woman did not differ significantly from that of the college woman . . . there is no physiological difference between the fertilities of the two classes . . . although the postponement of marriage generally attendant upon university education of women must to some extent reduce their average output of children."

The report next deals with the alleged effect of contraceptive methods, but the material it presents is limited and not convincing. It is confined to the Fabian Tract on "The Declining Birth-Rate," and to the facts elicited by their own inquiry, and

by one conducted by Lady Willoughby de Broke. An analysis of the combined results leads to the statement that after making allowance for differences in duration and of age at marriage the average size of family is greater among those who adopted conscious methods of restriction, than among those who did not; which is something of an anti-climax. Neuroses, and the grosser lesions affecting health and fertility, have been ascribed to some of the methods adopted, but for detail one must refer to the evidence itself.

Considering that the whole function of reproduction is physiological and vital, and only incidentally influenced by food and environment, it is surprising that only two witnesses were found to support the suggestion that some part of the declining birth-rate might be attributed to cyclical variation in the power to procreate or conceive. We have seasonal and cyclical variations in disease, and in almost every form of vital activity we are acquainted with, there are periods of activity and repose. That similar variations should occur in fertility does not seem improbable. In one case the illustrations were drawn from local records of the city of Glasgow. In the other suggestions were drawn from a wide field, and since the report was issued a further contribution to this aspect of the question has been published by Dr. Brownlee in "Public Health"—(the Journal of the Society of Medical Officers of Health) for June and July, 1916, and the paper should be read in connection with this section of the report. Its conclusions are (1) that at two epochs centering about the years 1600 and 1800 high birth-rates existed in England and Wales as a whole; (2) that during the intervening period centering about 1700 the birth-rate was considerably lower, a phenomenon again observed at the present day; and (3) that a considerable part of this oscillation in the birth-rate is an expression of race physiology.

For eugenists the short chapter in the report which deals with the economic and social aspects of the declining birth-rate is full of interest. While recognising the inheritance of both mental and physical characters the Commissioners think that the greater part of class inferiority is probably due to bad surroundings and example, and we agree. But the Legislature

must recognise that "any form of State relief which favours the reckless at the expense of the provident, will, in itself, have the effect of multiplying the former and diminishing the latter." "If," says Sir Francis Champneys in his evidence, "you allowed a man to write off in his income-tax paper the expenses of education as he does his life insurance, it is possible you would have a good many more babies than you have."

The reader will have gathered that while the report does not contain much that is very new, it abounds with suggestions for the statesman and economist, as well as the biologist.

Not one, but many contributory causes are apparently in operation in reducing the birth-rate of western Europe, and not one only, but many peoples are affected. Associated conditions which seem to be causes in one case are absent in others. The report does not claim to have exhausted the subject—evidence regarding reproduction in other forms of life might have been included with advantage—but it may truly be said to have prepared a basis, and indicated many directions for future work. If it reaches a second issue its utility would be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of an index.